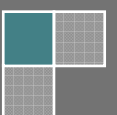


2010

The Next Steps

Forward Plan for the Valuation Tribunal Service 2010-13

Incorporates the Business Plan and Corporate Plan



Contents

FOREWORD BY THE CHAIRMAN	3
INTRODUCTION BY THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE	4
OUR VISION	5
OUR PURPOSE.....	5
THE VALUATION TRIBUNAL FOR ENGLAND (VTE)	5
OUR COMMITMENT	5
OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES	6
OUR SPONSORS AND THE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT.....	6
CONTEXT FOR OUR BUSINESS AND CORPORATE PLANS	7
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE	7
RESOURCES	8
DELIVERING EFFICIENCY	8
ESTATE	9
IT DEVELOPMENTS	10
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS.....	10
DELIVERING AND REPORTING ON THE BUSINESS PLAN.....	12
BUSINESS PLAN OBJECTIVES	13
CORPORATE PLAN.....	17
FUTURE ASPIRATIONS	17
APPENDIX: KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS.....	19

Foreword by the Chairman

I am pleased to present the Business and Corporate Plan for the VTS. This is a challenging time for public bodies preparing such plans but the restraint and efficiency which will be necessary have been themes which the VTS has pursued since we were established in 2004. I am proud of what has been achieved over those years, and I feel confident that we can continue to rise to the challenges which are presented to us.

Our focus will be strongly on supporting the new Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE). We recognise that the actual judicial hearing is a most significant part of the process of appeal for a user, but we equally recognise that the end to end experience for users must be satisfactory. The administrative processes must run smoothly, the communications with users must be clear and helpful, the support available to assist users must be appropriate, the venues we use must be suitable and independent, and the opportunity to feedback about their experience must be offered. Our processes should be enhanced by our telephony and information technology. We will aim to raise the quality of our service on all of these fronts.

We embark on the delivery of this business plan recognising that further changes and developments are likely in the world of tribunals generally, and possibly for the VTS and the VTE. We have maintained regular contact with the appropriate officials and we remain ready to discuss developments which could be of benefit to users of the service and to the taxpayer.

Anne Galbraith OBE
Chairman, Valuation Tribunal Service

Introduction by the Chief Executive

Welcome to the VTS Forward Plan, bringing together the Corporate Plan for 2010-2013 and our Business Plan for the financial year 2010-11. These Plans set out the organisation's on-going drive towards the effective management of resources, efficiency improvements and the building of organisational capacity through investment in our people and infrastructure.

The past year has been a particularly important one for the VTS. On 1 October 2009 we welcomed the establishment of the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE). The creation of a single tribunal, replacing the former 56 separate tribunals, has been a major part of our planning since the VTS was first set up in 2004. We will continue to cement our partnership with the VTE, seeking to enhance the end-to-end customer experience of Valuation Tribunal users by recognising their needs as our primary concern as we develop for the future.

I am pleased that last year we were successful in putting in place some foundations to build on. We introduced the remote and mobile working scheme and established more focussed project management processes. We have appointed an Operations Manager to provide a greater focus on the effective and efficient management of office resources and to champion consistency of processes across our offices. However, there is still much more to do. This document sets out our key commitments for the forthcoming year.

Our staff remain committed to dealing professionally and effectively with the challenges and opportunities presented. I value and welcome their continued enthusiasm and support. I would like to acknowledge their support, and thank the staff for their hard work and their commitment to achieving the best outcomes for the service as a whole.

Antonio Masella
Chief Executive

Our Vision

The Valuation Tribunal Service will continue to enhance the end-to-end customer experience of Valuation Tribunal users by focussing on considering their needs as its primary concern.

Our Purpose

The Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS) is the administrative body that supports the operation of the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) by managing the following services:

- Accommodation;
- staffing;
- information technology;
- equipment;
- training for members and staff; and
- general advice about procedure relating to the proceedings before tribunals.

The VTS was created under the Local Government Act 2003 and established as a non-departmental public body on 1 April 2004. It is sponsored by Communities and Local Government.

The Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE)

The VTE, headed by a national president providing judicial leadership and guidance to a volunteer membership, acquired its jurisdiction on 1 October 2009 (under provisions in the Local Government Finance Act 1988 as amended by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007) bringing an end to the 56 separate valuation tribunals that previously existed.

The VTE has a statutory duty to hear and determine appeals against valuation for non-domestic (business) rates, council tax and drainage rates. Other types of appeals within the Valuation Tribunals' jurisdiction are those against council tax liability, completion notices and certain types of penalties imposed by billing authorities (councils) or the Valuation Office Agency (VOA).

Our Commitment

In discharging our statutory responsibility and mindful of the Framework of Standards for Tribunals¹, the VTS is committed to:

- supporting the VTE in providing independent, open, fair and impartial hearings;
- remaining accessible to users and focussing on the needs of users; and

¹ The Administrative, Justice and Tribunals Council - Framework of Standards for Tribunals (2002).

- offering cost effective procedures and being properly resourced and organised.

The VTS is further committed to supporting the VTE to find effective ways to discharge its functions in accordance with the criteria set out in Regulation 3 of The Valuation Tribunal for England (Council Tax and Rating Appeal) (Procedure) Regulations 2009, namely:

- dealing with appeals in ways which are proportionate to the importance of the appeal;
- having regard to the complexity of the issues, the anticipated costs and the resources of the parties;
- avoiding unnecessary formality and seeking flexibility in the proceedings;
- ensuring, so far as practicable, that the parties are able to participate fully in the proceedings;
- using any special expertise of the VTE effectively; and
- avoiding delay, so far as compatible with proper consideration of the issues.

Our Strategic Objectives

Our strategic objectives for the year ahead are:

- to enhance our support to the Valuation Tribunal for England;
- to improve further the way we work and achieve a higher quality and more consistent service;
- to operate in ways which are efficient, economic and provide value for money;
- to build capacity to deliver through our people.

Details of these objectives can be found on pages 13-16.

Our Sponsors and the Management Statement

Sponsored by Communities and Local Government (CLG), we contribute to CLG's priorities and objectives, as well as to cross-government Public Service Agreements (PSAs). In particular, our objectives aim to support PSA 21 to "*build more cohesive, empowered and active communities*", and the Departmental Strategic Objective (DSO1) "*To support local government that empowers individuals and communities and delivers high quality services efficiently*".

The relationship between the VTS and CLG is governed by the Management Statement setting out the broad framework within which the VTS operates, the key targets being:

- to establish a cohesive national structure for the VTS within which policies on training, information technology, accommodation and staff terms and conditions are applied consistently;
- to improve customer understanding of, and satisfaction with, the work of the Valuation Tribunal for England;
- to work with the Valuation Tribunal for England and other stakeholders to improve the appeals process from lodgement to settlement;
- to secure improvements in the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of service provided by the Valuation Tribunal for England; and
- to offer general advice to the Valuation Tribunal for England in relation to proceedings before hearings.

Context for our Business and Corporate Plans

The VTS was established on 1 April 2004 and operated from 23 sets of premises located across England, with a staff in post of 159 (150.2 full time equivalents). In the six years to March 2010, the number of staff has reduced to 95 (92.5 full time equivalents) and we currently occupy eight premises. Our estate footprint has reduced by more than 60% and our staff by 40%.

Set against these efficiencies, the VTS has played an active role in the reorganisation of the tribunals themselves, having recommended the establishment of a single tribunal with a President and new processes for the appointment of members. The VTS has also played a key role in seeking changes to the appeal processes for council tax, which have now been implemented.

Organisational Structure

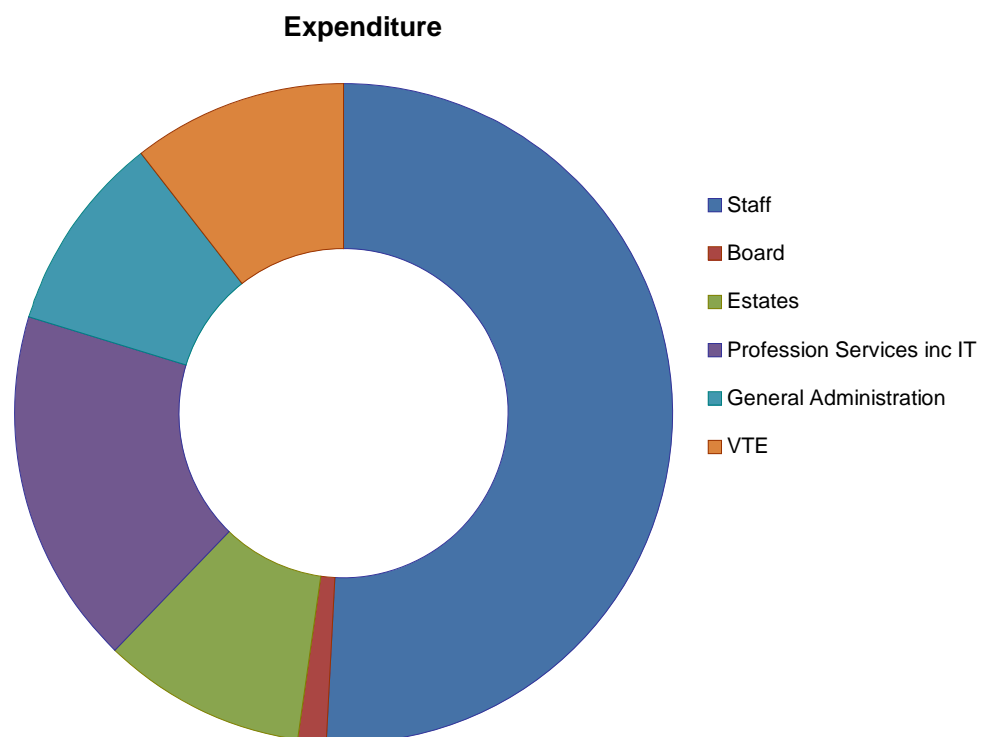
With the establishment of the VTE on 1 October 2009 we reviewed our previous four-region structure (North, Central, East and South) to establish whether this was the most effective way to support the VTE. As a result of that review we have replaced this structure and established a national Operations Manager to provide more effective and efficient management of office resources and to introduce greater consistency in processes.

We have introduced a home-based working scheme (remote and mobile working) for selected technical staff, to provide more flexible staffing arrangements supporting the VTE at hearings. We currently have 10 members of staff, representing 10% of the total staff, working under this new scheme.

We remain committed to retaining and developing staff wherever possible, although we recognise that staff may choose to leave our employment whether through retirement or for alternative employment. In such circumstances we will replace in-house, or appoint staff where there is a sound operational need to do so.

Resources

The VTS receives grant-in-aid from its sponsoring department to fund its activities. Planned expenditure for 2010-11 is around £10,935,000 which is allocated to the following cost headings:



Delivering Efficiency

The VTS is required by our sponsoring department to seek efficiency gains. Therefore, ensuring value for money remains a key objective for us, and our continuing scrutiny of expenditure on estates and IT, together with new IT infrastructure which will support our operations more effectively, will reflect our aim to improve our effectiveness in these areas. We will continue to research new ways to deliver our services seeking to use shared services wherever possible.

Estate

A major component of delivering the service we provide is the estate itself. The location of our offices and their functionality are essential ingredients of our success, as they represent our second highest revenue cost. We have already been through a period of considerable change around our estate. These changes have brought significant benefit to the VTS both operationally and financially. We have now started to translate these benefits into improved service to users to reinforce our commitment to good service and good value. During the last financial year we took advantage of lease ends and vacated our offices in Nottingham, Leamington Spa and Horsham. We currently operate from eight centres in England, which will reduce to seven by August 2010 with the closure of our Werrington (Peterborough) office. We recognise that our estate needs to change yet further to make a more effective contribution to our service provision. The location and quality of hearing venues and the location and size of our administrative centres have both been scrutinised. Research undertaken indicates that the service we provide in processing paperwork and cases in support of hearings could be provided from as few as three administrative centres in optimal locations.

We believe that through our strategic estates activity we have made a number of beneficial changes to help meet the aims of the organisation and improve the customer experience. Since 2004 we have reduced the total floor area by 60%.

We also provide premises, usually hired on a hearing-by-hearing basis, for judicial hearings to take place. There are currently around 200 venues identified where the parties (the VOA, the billing authority and the appellant or their representative) attend. We strongly believe that hearings should be conducted at suitable locations and in suitable premises and have developed criteria in line with guidance from the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council to explain what 'suitable' means in the context of the venue for a judicial hearing:

- hearing venues located within a reasonable travel time for tribunal users;
- accessible venues which meet the needs of all attendees;
- adequate space at venues for hearings, privacy, preparation and waiting;
- appropriate environment for judicial proceedings to take place;
- ensuring independence from the bodies whose decision is being appealed;
- meeting health and safety needs; and
- providing value for money.

The VTS recognised that office closures could lead to the loss of experienced and professionally qualified tribunal-taking staff and so a Remote and Mobile Working Scheme facilitating retention of these staff has been implemented. The development of a viable remote and mobile working solution has reduced the need for a permanent office base for technical staff and has reduced the risk of redundancy when offices have closed.

IT Developments

We have implemented four projects during the last financial year to support the service we provide. These are:

- Identity - including the merger of 56 valuation tribunals to a single VTE; the name for the new organisational structure.
- Remote and mobile working capability - allowing secure access to the administrative intranet, emails and appeals database.
- Upgrading the secure intranet - from GSx to GSi.
- Upgrading the central database - to reflect the revaluation for non-domestic rates in 2010.

During the current year we will be working towards introducing an accurate and automatic Management Information System. Work on this commenced its design stage in January 2010 and implementation is expected in June 2010.

Recent Developments

In implementing changes and conducting business, we are mindful of our external and internal environment. Some key factors are outlined below:

Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE)

The VTE was launched on 1 October 2009, under a national President, Professor Graham Zellick QC, supported by four Vice-Presidents. New procedural and appeals regulations came into force on the same day. In supporting the new body and implementing the new procedures, the administration has been and continues to be very active, aiming to ensure that changes occur smoothly and that our stakeholders understand both the need for and the effects of the changes.

Public Finances

We acknowledge that the economic recession has had severe implications for public finances and that these are times for restraint and sensitivity around the use of public money, and for increased effort to operate efficiently and economically.

Workload

The projected workloads for the VTS are shown below and are based on the assumptions that there are no regulatory changes or reinterpretation of existing regulations. This is the first year of the 2010 non-domestic rating (business) rating list, when typically the majority of appeals are received. However, while numerically smaller overall, council tax appeals necessitate more resource input since a greater proportion of the appeals received result in an actual hearing.

Appeal Type		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Appeals received	Non domestic rating	200,000	100,000	80,000
	Council tax	3,750	3,250	3250
	TOTAL	203,750	103,250	83,250
Appeals listed	Non domestic rating	100,000	100,000	80,000
	Council tax	3,200	2,800	2,800
	TOTAL	103,100	102,800	82,800
Written decisions	Non domestic rating	1,500	1,500	1,200
	Council tax	1,600	1,500	1,500
	TOTAL	3,100	3,000	2700
All tribunal decisions	Non domestic rating	15,000	15,000	12,000
	Council tax	2,100	1,800	1,800
	TOTAL	17,100	16,800	13,800

The Tribunals Service

Valuation Tribunal decisions in respect of non-domestic rating appeals can be appealed to the Lands Tribunal. In June 2009, the Lands Tribunal became the Lands Chamber of the Upper Tribunal of the new unified tribunal structure. The judicial functions of the Lands Tribunal were not changed. Leasehold Valuation Tribunals and Residential Property Tribunals, from which the Lands Tribunal also hears appeals, continue in their present form, although it is expected that in due course both will form part of a new First-tier Tribunal Land Chamber.

The President of the VTE and the Chairman of the VTS maintain a close contact with relevant officials of the Tribunal Service, CLG and Senior President of Tribunals in relation to future intentions for the VTE and VTS.

Data security

This topic has assumed growing importance on the public agenda, and the VTS, along with all government bodies, is charged with meeting increasingly stringent requirements, laid down by the Cabinet Office. The Government has put in place a core set of mandatory minimum measures to protect information handled by central government. As an NDPB, the VTS is obliged to comply and assess its own risk, ensuring that staff are aware of their responsibilities. As policies develop and lessons are learnt, the VTS will ensure its response matches Cabinet Office requirements.

User Survey

In November 2009, we commissioned a rolling survey of those appellants (or representatives) who had attended a hearing during each month. This more frequent data will allow us to be more informed and, therefore, more responsive to tribunal users' perceptions and experience of the service we provide.

Delivering and reporting on the Business Plan

The Business Plan is published on our website and on the staff intranet. VTS budget holders bid for budgets on the basis of the objectives outlined in the Plan. These objectives provide the basis for staff personal development objectives.

The delivery of this Plan will be monitored at three levels, each on a quarterly basis. The delivery of targets and achievements against the Plan will be monitored by the Board; the Chief Executive will monitor the achievements of the Plan; and we will share our achievements with the sponsoring department through the regular liaison meetings.

In line with our business objectives for 2010-11, we also look to further develop our key performance indicators (outlined in Appendix) within a balanced scorecard framework.

Business Plan Objectives

Strategic objective:

We will enhance our support to the Valuation Tribunal for England.

What we have already achieved in 2009-10:

- We worked with CLG in preparing draft regulations.
- We created the post of Registrar and Chief Clerk to provide the VTE with a dedicated VTS resource to assist with its strategic judicial vision and to put forward views on the appropriateness of administrative processes in accordance with the aims and objectives of the VTS.
- We provided a personal assistant to the VTE President to assist in his work.
- We implemented a new VTE identity on 1 October 2009, using project management methodology.
- We set up a Valuation Tribunal User Group with the President that includes representatives from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Institute of Revenues, Rating & Valuation, Rating Surveyors' Association, Federation of Small Businesses, Valuation Office Agency, the Local Government Association and Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber).
- We implemented a training programme and trained some 600 VTE members on new regulatory processes in readiness for the VTE.
- We put in place a training programme for staff who advise members at hearings on new regulations and VTE procedural requirements.

What we want to achieve in 2010-11 and how we will measure it:

Objective	Measure
Encourage and maintain effective relationships with stakeholders	Stakeholder surveys; feedback from liaison meetings; complaints
Implement an appropriate training programme for VTE members	Training Strategy Group involvement; implementation of a programme; evaluate training courses
Support the appraisal system for all VTE Members	Successful appraisal system implemented
Seek new ways to support users in preparing their cases	Focus groups; tribunal user surveys; complaints; updating the DVD
Facilitate a conference of Chairmen to enhance their judicial development	Feedback questionnaires
Select and use better quality venues for tribunal hearings	Tribunal user surveys; member and staff feedback; Venue Management Policy
Improve the training and qualifications of our staff in supporting VTE hearings	Monitor training opportunities for and applications from staff
Develop IT systems that are effective, efficient and user friendly	Automated administrative processes wherever practicable.

Strategic objective:

We will seek to improve further the way we work and achieve a higher quality and more consistent service.

What we have already achieved in 2009-10:

- We now provide a national focus matched to the requirements of the VTE, replacing the four-region VTS structure first established in 2006.
- We have appointed an Operations Manager to provide this national focus and management at national level to all office and home-based staff, implementing lean processes.
- In closing offices we have offered home-based working with flexible contracts to staff providing technical advice to the lay membership to better support hearings on a national basis, removing artificial regional boundaries.
- We have used a focus group to gather views on the information provided in our family of leaflets and website to ensure that the information we provide is user-friendly and jargon-free wherever possible.
- We have reinforced our governance processes, and appointed a Corporate Services Manager to support the Board and key committees.

What we want to achieve in 2010-11 and how we will measure it:

Objective	Measure
Listen to users of the service and respond to their concerns	Focus groups; tribunal user surveys; stakeholder groups
Enhance the organisational structure so that it is more responsive to modern needs	Implementation of the organisational structure; focussed management; performance management
Develop new protocols for processing business	Process mapping to reflect new VTE Practice Statements
Set targets and performance indicators for our staff	Objective setting for all staff; staff development and appraisal interviews; staff survey
Optimise the VTS estate portfolio to ensure needs are met	Reduced fixed estate costs; mirroring workload in offices
Use fewer but better venues for tribunal hearings	A completed audit of venues; Tribunal user surveys
Improve and consolidate administrative processes into administrative centres to support quality initiatives	Consistent processes in place supported by lean

Strategic objective:

We will operate in ways which are efficient, economic and provide value for money.

What we have already achieved in 2009-10:

- We have reduced the size of our estate and our staff numbers and this has permitted us to invest in further customer improvements.
- We have established a Finance Committee that scrutinises the management accounts and makes recommendations to the Board on any actions to be taken.
- We have agreed a wide area network contract that provides greater flexibility to the changing VTS IT environment.
- We have centralised our accounting function into head office.

What we want to achieve in 2010-11 and how we will measure it:

Objective	Measure
Review the current delivery of IT services for effectiveness and value for money	Quality controls and assurance mechanisms; robust management of third party suppliers
Make greater and more effective use of IT	Implementation of a wide area network able to flex with the organisation; introduce MIS and quality reporting
Investigate possibilities for achieving better value and better service through outsourcing aspects of our service	Providing value for money
Encourage shared service initiatives where appropriate and worthwhile	Financial measures
Introduce "lean" methodology to improve our efficiency	Evaluate lean processes using an independent specialist
Promote high standards of governance and accountability	Internal audit

Strategic objective:

We will build capacity to deliver through our people.

What we have already achieved in 2009-10:

- We have introduced a number of project teams embracing the different skills that staff can provide in building the future.
- We have encouraged the personal development of our staff and provided financial support through our Qualification Sponsorship Scheme.

- We have encouraged and supported our staff in attaining the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation professional qualification, recognised to be the most appropriate qualification for the skills and expertise our staff require.
- We have reviewed the effectiveness of the Board and revised the committee structure.

What we want to achieve in 2010-11 and how we will measure it:

Objective	Measure
Keep the organisation's structure under review to ensure we offer the best opportunities we can to staff	Staff survey
Create more flexible job descriptions and maximising on the flexibility of staff to meet operational needs	Development and appraisal reviews; percentage of vacancies filled internally
Introduce a revised staff appraisal system, undertaking personal reviews and appraisals at all levels, to help staff develop in supporting the VTS and as they would wish, acknowledging excellence and achievements	Staff appraisal system implemented on time; number of performance awards
Offer management and technical development and training within the review and appraisal process	Take up of training opportunities monitored; success in exams recorded
Enhance communication and team building	Feedback from staff, better use of intranet as a medium

Corporate Plan

The creation of the VTE and the ongoing development and modernisation of the VTS provide a significant catalyst for change this year and for the two subsequent years to 31 March 2013.

Both statutory bodies, working in close partnership, will provide a united focus on improving consistency, developing judicial expertise, enhancing the user experience, communicating with and listening to our stakeholders and delivering exceptional value for money. The spotlight will be on robust and measurable quality improvements which provide lasting benefits to tribunal-users, stakeholders, members and staff alike.

Future Aspirations

2011- 12

Our aims will be to:

- Provide a high level of professionalism and career development for our staff by recognising, rewarding and nurturing talent.
- Build high performance teams and set objectives aligned to organisational goals.
- Build lean process in all that we do so that we have smart processes that support our business.
- Plan for further enhancements to our technological processes so that we continue to operate efficiently and effectively.
- Enhance our professional and technical expertise in supporting the Valuation Tribunal for England at hearings and in back office functions.
- Continue to implement appropriate enhancements to our processes in strengthening our relationship with stakeholders.
- Further encourage continual professional improvement and learning as a core business activity.
- Benchmark ourselves to other like organisations to assess areas of further service improvement.
- Further develop our key performance indicators and balanced scorecard.
- Continue to advance our estates optimisation programme by utilising prudent investment to provide longer term savings.

2012-13

Our aims will be to:

- Openly seek to improve the performance of our staff.
- Continue to seek ways of becoming efficient in the way we work.
- Review processes in place to ensure that they continue to meet business needs and support potential reforms.
- Achieve wide ownership of change by involving representative groups.
- Review organisational data so that it continues to support business planning.

APPENDIX: Key Performance Indicators

	Performance Measure	Target
Customer satisfaction	Tribunal users are satisfied that we meet the commitments in our Customer Charter	90%
	Overall satisfaction level of tribunal users who have attended a hearing	As good as or better than comparable organisations
	Tribunal decisions are issued within one month of the hearing date	92%
Customer service	Invoices are paid within 10 days of receipt	90%
	Employee satisfaction levels	As good as or better than comparable organisations
	Reduction in days lost through staff sickness absence, per member of staff	Fewer than 8 days
Building capability	Average number of days training per member of staff (FTE)	2 days
Efficient use of resources	Reduced fixed costs for our estate	Below £1.23m